

Feb+March 2009, Art World, Dan Colen, "Dan Colen" p1

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# Dan Colen

"My work is for people to do whatever they want with;  
I just put it out there and see what happens"



- 1 **Fuck** (2004), digital photograph with digital drawing, 244 x 45cm
- 2 **Untitled (zippideedoodah)** (2006), installation view from *Day For Night* (2006), Whitney Biennial, dimensions variable
- 3 **No Sex No War No Me** (2006), enamel and moulding paste on plywood, 144.8 x 101cm
- 4 **Untitled (an Allegory of Faith)** (2008), oil on canvas, 213.4 x 215cm

DAN COLLEN makes paintings, sculptures, installations and photographs which embody a subcultural aesthetic that has been described as base, lo-fi and trashy. Alongside notable peers such as Dash Snow, Ryan McGinley, Terence Koh and Nate Lowman, Colen is counted as part of a new artistic vanguard emerging from the culturally irrepressible milieu of New York's Lower East Side. Some argue that Colen is nothing other than a well-connected scenester – a figure undeserving of serious critical attention or praise. However, as the hype settles down following his appearance on the international art scene, many are taking a second, altogether more serious look at his work. What they are discovering is an intelligent, sustained and above all culturally relevant remix of contemporary culture. *INTERVIEW: Paul Pieroni*

**According to a website that checks out this sort of thing, there are approximately 156,014 Dans and 1,010 Colens in America. You are, however, the only Dan Colen. How does that feel?**

Yeah? No shit! Wow that's nice to know, that's good, I like it. Most of my family has been in Brooklyn for five or six generations but my grandfather changed it from Cohen, which is a pretty Jewish name, to Colen.

**Tell me about your "hoop dreams" – how close did you get to your childhood dream of playing pro basketball in the NBA?**

Not that close! Three years before I quit I was the only white guy in an all-black travelling team. We went to the nationals a couple of times, so that's my claim to fame! I gave up once I started skateboarding.

**Your recent Gagosian exhibition was your first in London – how do its three parts relate to each other?**

Well, for the first part, I commissioned an illustrator to produce a series of framed pencil drawings based on notebooks that I had filled with ideas. Like the other works in the show – a large scale painting, *An Allegory of Faith...* (2008), and a new book of photos – they're kind of playing with a duality; a split between here and there, fantasy and reality. I think it works really well in the gallery space as well [Gagosian's vitrine-like space in Davies Street, London] because there's that inside-out thing going on.

**Like your earlier candle paintings, *An Allegory of Faith...* reworks an image from a Disney animation. Why Disney?**

The image featured in *An Allegory of Faith...* is taken from when Walt Disney's Cinderella first meets her fairy Godmother – though neither character actually features in the image. I may do another version where you see this cloud where the fairy godmother sort of appears and disappears. With regards to

the Disney thing, it's almost coincidental, I swear! I guess it has something to do with the fact that Disney storylines are pretty consistent. Also, the interest I have in Cinderella and her fairy Godmother, or with Pinocchio and his maker Geppetto, perhaps relates to a kind of hope that they represent.

**Can you explain the intention behind the cycle of candle paintings?**

I just happened across a still image from Pinocchio of a candle on Geppetto's desk. I was interested in the idea of this light source. You find a lot of these dramatically lit scenes in Disney which, added to the story lines, just seem to work with what is in my mind.

**The photos of New York's Central Park in the book given away during the exhibition have a deliberately amateur feel.**

I used a shitty digital camera to take them when I was searching for an image for the invitation. I was thinking about Central Park as this big forest-like place inside the city, a kind of strange fantasy land. I just went around the park in the evening or at night shooting. When I looked at the images they seemed to add to the two other disparate elements in the exhibition, bringing them together or maybe even pushing them apart.

**Would you say your work offers a gritty contemporary twist on social realism?**

I wouldn't say that I'm consciously trying to propose anything so defined. But I'm honestly very happy for people to read into my work and give it whatever gravity they feel. Really my work is for people to do whatever they want with; I just put it out there and see what happens ...

**Can you explain your Birdshit paintings?**

They came about pretty naturally through my rock sculptures. I made a series of fake boulders with graffiti on them and towards the end I ended up covering them with fake

bubblegum and bird shit. I guess I was thinking of Jim Morrison's grave [in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris] and the little pieces of evidence that build up around places like that. It just occurred to me, instead of being on these rocks, the birdshit could be its own thing on a canvas.

**Text features consistently in your work.**

There is something about visually playing with language that I naturally gravitate towards. Though I use words in a purely visual way, they of course have connotations. For me words can break down a work, simplify it; or open it up to become a bigger thing.

**How do you explain the difference between the time-consuming photorealist paintings and your rapid graffiti text works?**

Originally the scrawled graffiti texts were just a reaction to the "lifestyle" of hard and painstaking painting I was living. I can't produce all my work like that. I think it was just a natural physical need to produce something instantly. I really needed an outlet for ideas which could be turned into a work without being given time to ferment.

**Is there a single misunderstanding you consistently encounter about your work?**

A lot of people have got caught up in who they think I am because of my friends and social life and have trouble getting to my work at all. Early on most of my decision making had to do with being able to keep on making art and not necessarily about how I might be perceived or thought of.

**Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?**

I don't know if I can answer that: too many names. Maybe an Ed Ruscha? Or perhaps a Frederic Church painting, or a Rothko.

*Exhibitions: An Allegory of Faith...?, Gagosian Gallery, Davies St, London, until 2Feb; www.gagosian.com*

**CV** Born: 1979, Leonia, New Jersey, US Studied: Rhode Island School of Art and Design, Providence, US Lives and works: New York Represented: Peres Projects, Berlin and Los Angeles

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Feb+March 2009, Art World, Dan Colen, "Dan Colen" p2

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*The Fourth Season (2008), chewing gum, gum wrappers on canvas, 60.9 x 45cm plus frame*

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Above **Untitled** (2008), oil on canvas, 71 x 56cm plus frame

Right **Untitled** (2008), oil on canvas, 91.5 x 61cm plus frame

[These works are shown in proportion]

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